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SUBJECT: SHIA AGAIN PONDER UIA AS AN ELECTORAL VEHICLE

REF: A. BAGHDAD 00979
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 00401
[1](#)C. BAGHDAD 01704
[1](#)D. BAGHDAD 01600
[1](#)E. BAGHDAD 01520

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Robert S. Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Local media and Embassy contacts are speculating about the imminent revival of the Unified Iraqi Alliance (UIA) as a coalition for the planned January parliamentary election. The potential revival of the UIA encompasses three main issues: whether the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq party (ISCI) and the Prime Minister's Da'wa would run under one banner, whether the coalition brings in significant non-Shia parties, and whether the Sadrists will sign up. As Iraqi politicians participate in a dizzying series of meetings on the subject, most challenging for them will be to reach a compromise on the allocation of parliamentary seats and leadership posts, including how the alliance will nominate a candidate for prime minister. End summary.

ISCI As Standard-Bearer

[1](#)2. (C) The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), since the selection in mid-May of the imposing Humam Hamoudi as the party's lead UIA negotiator, has attempted to publicly portray itself at the UIA standard-bearer. This task is made marginally easier by the fact that ISCI chairman Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim is currently the nominal head of the UIA and that ISCI/Badr is the largest remaining member of the UIA in parliament. ISCI leaders are probably betting that advocating for Shia unity will be popular among their constituents, as well as among adherents of other Shia parties. Advocating for a re-invigorated UIA also allows ISCI, in the event the UIA fails to come together, to fend off blame for causing an intra-Shia schism.

[1](#)3. (C) At the same time, ISCI leaders have linked their party's poor performance in January 2009 provincial elections partly to its overly religious message and sectarian branding (ref A and B). Under a new UIA, ISCI would have to balance the need to rally the Shia masses against the decreasing popularity of sectarian-based politics. This balancing act is already underway. ISCI MP and cleric Jalal al-Din al-Saghir during a Friday sermon on July 10 criticized an unnamed cabinet official for calling the UIA sectarian. Hadi al-Amiri, the head of the Badr Organization, told Poloffs on July 11 (using revisionist history) that the UIA was never a sectarian coalition because it always has been open to non-Shia. Amiri said that in going forward, ISCI will build a large electoral coalition that includes Shia, Sunnis Arabs, Kurds, Christians and Turkomen. Minister of State for National Dialogue Akram al-Hakim, a founding member of ISCI, told us on July 12 that a reconstituted UIA must extend

beyond sectarian lines to increase its national appeal.

¶4. (C) Unlike 2005, proponents of a new UIA do not talk of it as a vehicle to ensure Shia dominance within government. On ISCI's English-language website, its deputy chairman, Ammar al-Hakim, argued that a broad UIA was needed to mitigate the "loss of votes" caused when small, desperate parties fail to get enough votes to obtain representation. (Note: Shia clerics have not yet publicly advocated for a new UIA. End note.)

¶5. (C) Raja al-Khalili, an advisor to Vice President Adil Abd al-Mahdi (ISCI), told us in June that during UIA negotiations, PM Maliki demanded that he remain the coalition's pick for prime minister. ISCI has not ruled out this possibility, Khalili said, but a second Maliki term must come with enhanced constraints upon the Prime Minister's Qcome with enhanced constraints upon the Prime Minister's authority. (Maliki, by contrast, has publicly complained he is already too constrained by the "consensus" government that forced him to accept rivals within his cabinet.) Khalili claimed VP Abd al-Mahdi is trying to recruit former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi to the UIA so to better appeal to Sunni Arabs and Kurdish voters. Notably, ISCI has not floated the idea of basing its electoral coalition upon its durable alliance with the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) and Kurds in the parliament, a partnership that has rallied together this year to successfully assert legislative oversight of the PM's office.

Sunni Arabs Assume Shia Will Coalesce

¶6. (C) Meanwhile, some Sunni Arab politicians are expecting a revived UIA that boxes them out. Advisors to VP Tariq al-Hashimi and Deputy Prime Minister Issawi told us in July

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they expected the announcement of a new UIA this month and that the Iranian government was partly behind the rebuilding effort. In June meetings with Poloffs, IIP MP Salim al-Jibouri and Salih Mutlaq, leader of the Iraqi National Dialogue Front, predicted the return of a Shia UIA that would push the Sunnis and Kurds into their own sectarian blocs for the election--a comment that KRG President Masoud Barzani has also echoed. Mutlaq claimed that Maliki had offered him the presidency of Iraq in exchange for an electoral alliance. He had rejected the offer, however, because his constituents would abandon him for joining Maliki, who is still perceived as sectarian among Sunni circles. Jibouri predicted Iraq's election to mirror Lebanon's--large competing ethno-sectarian parties--but said his IIP will seek to reconstruct its present cross-sectarian cooperation in parliament with ISCI and the Kurds. (ISCI's Jalal ad-Din Saghir told us the same when we dined with him at the Baratha mosque at the end of June.)

¶7. (C) The Secretary General of the IIP, Osama Tikriti, told Poloff on July 1 that his party was holding talks with Ayad Allawi, among others, to form a "national coalition." Tikriti added that relations between the IIP and Da'wa were warming, but did not indicate anything tangible regarding a potential alliance.

Maliki Seeking a "National List"

¶8. (C) Advisors to PM Maliki have consistently told us since provincial elections that Maliki and his provincial election State of Law coalition would avoid a sectarian alliance like the old UIA. Instead, they claimed, Maliki intends to form a cross-sectarian or "national list." In March, Sami al-Askari, a close Maliki advisor, stated to Emboffs that State of Law succeeded in provincial elections because it emphasized Iraqi unity and a strong central government. For the parliamentary election, Askari said, Da'wa will seek a

national list that runs in all provinces, including placing Sunni Arabs on the ticket in Anbar. MP Jabir Habib Jabir (UIA independent) claimed to us that he is working behind the scenes to make this happen for Maliki (ref C). Sadiq al-Rikabi, another close Maliki advisor, as recently as July 7 told us it was unlikely Maliki would join a reconstituted Shia coalition for the parliamentary election. Rikabi said "we are trying to avoid the Lebanese experiment" of a sectarian and divided government. Amid meetings with UIA colleagues in Baghdad, Maliki last week visited Anbar, the Sunni Arab heartland, to call for a "national plan" and to warn against "sectarian and racist plans."

Comment: Inclusion of Sadrists Risky; Premiership Indeterminate

¶9. (C) For both ISCI and Da'wa, gaining Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist Trend as electoral allies would bring a reliable swath of nationalistic voters concerned about welfare issues. If the Sadrists join a new UIA, Da'wa and ISCI would have to reconcile the Sadrists' anti-U.S. positions (and regular criticism of the Iraqi government and security forces) with the Shia-led government's call for close bilateral ties with the U.S. In the event that a referendum on the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement (SA) is held with the national election (ref D and E), the Sadrists would be tempted to remind voters that their Da'wa and ISCI rivals supported the SA. Another challenge of a Sadrist return to the UIA would be management of Sadrist expectations of future government posts. For example, during the formation of provincial governments early this year, Da'wa was reluctant to offer Sadrist candidates the governorships of areas that border Iran for fear they would allow more weapons smuggling. The memory of the baleful mismanagement of the Health Ministry under Sadrist leadership from 2006 to March 2007 must give serious Iraqi officials pause in considering whether to offer the Sadrists a path back into government.

¶10. (C) Comment continued. If Da'wa and ISCI were to agree to the terms of a new UIA, smaller Shia parties would likely bandwagon given the expectation that the UIA would once again be the largest bloc in parliament from which a new government would be formed. However, even the largest conceivable Shia UIA would require some Sunni Arab or Kurdish MPs to support formation of a government. It is possible that if Maliki fails to build a genuine national, cross-sectarian coalition, a re-united UIA would pull in a few Sunni Arabs to run in Sunni Arab provinces like Anbar and Ninewa. The unified Shia list that ran in January 2005 had nine Sunni Arabs on its lists. (Notably, they have all disappeared from the national political scene now.) Hadi al-Amiri, the Badr chief, told Poloffs on July 11 that a new UIA would devise its own internal mechanism for nominating a prime minister. He cautioned that some other bloc leaders would have to agree on

* Missing Section 003 *
